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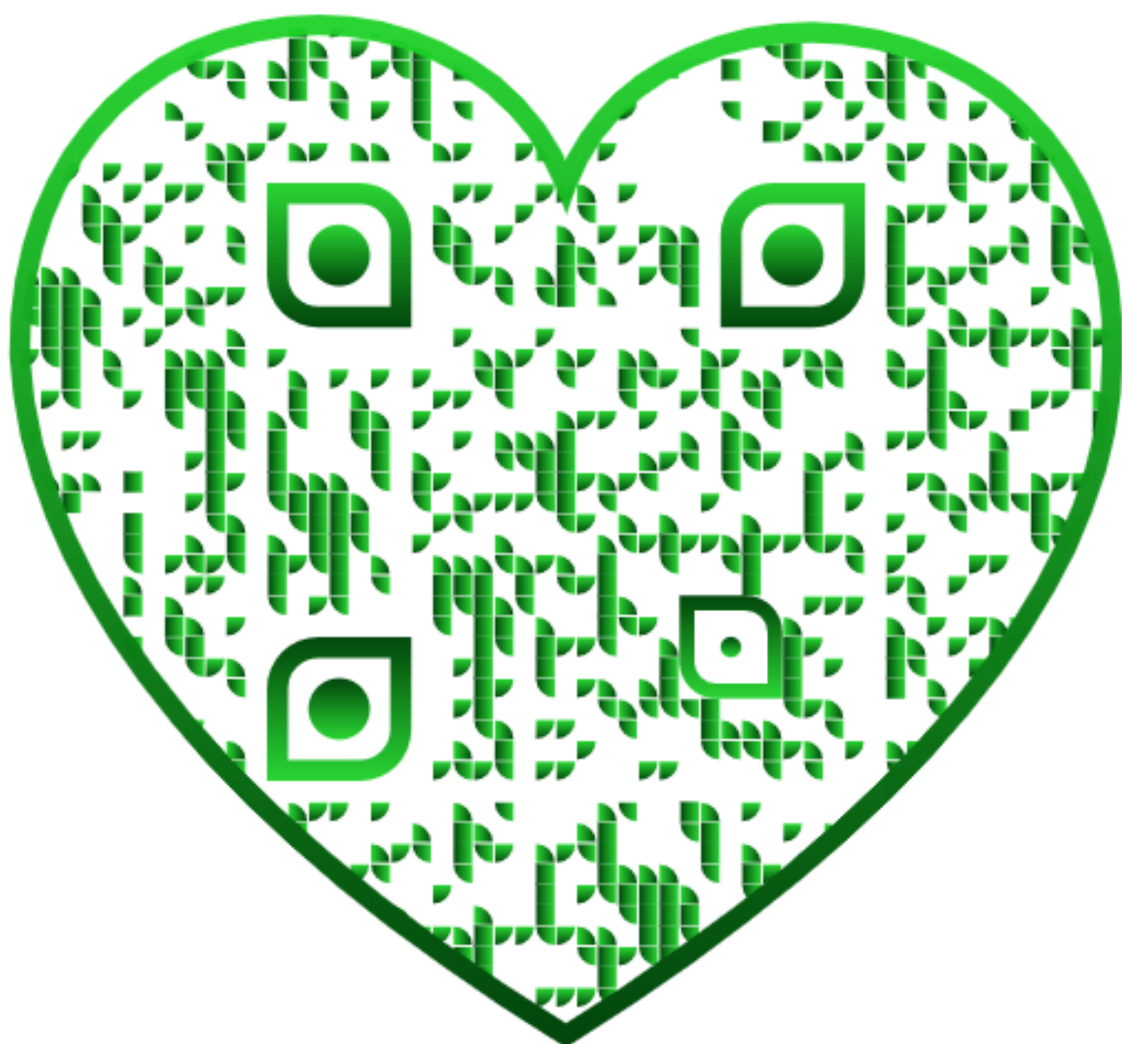
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The hens of this breed are calm, friendly and inquisitive. Whiting True Blue chickens aren't aggressive toward humans or other chickens, making them ideal for the novice. They're also a hardy breed

that tolerates summer heat and winter chills. Hens live a respectable 5 to 10 years. Whiting True Blue chickens come in many colors but don't breed true.

Murray McMurray Hatchery describes the hens as "excellent layers and aren't likely to set. Egg size will start out with medium size eggs and progress to large eggs given adequate nutrition.

"Each bird will have a varying feather pattern, coloration and leg color which will add color and beauty to your flock. This breed is heat-tolerant, has a good disposition and free ranges well. Whiting True Blues will breed true for egg color." 🐔

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Wanna Get Away?

Travel season is upon us, and it's time for a summertime jaunt. You've booked your vacation days and selected your destination. You're ready to hit the beach, the mountains or wherever you plan to explore. You only need to pack and ... find someone a chicken sitter to look after your birds. *Uh-oh!* Perhaps getting away isn't as easy as you'd hoped.

There's no reason to worry. While choosing a chicken sitter is vital to a successful getaway, it's not an insurmountable task. Multiple options exist in your community; you just need to know where to look. Knowing what you'll expect from your stand-in will help you determine who is best suited to sit.

Don't ask another chicken-keeper to watch your hens, as they could bring diseases from their flock to yours.

1. REMEMBER YOUR BIOSECURITY BASICS

The first person you find to work as a chicken sitter is not necessarily the best choice. Protect your hens' health by practicing backyard biosecurity: Don't call in a bird-owning buddy to babysit.

Illness might not be apparent in your friend's flock, but diseases such as Marek's can survive for months in poultry dust and dander. Just a few germs carried into your yard on your caretaker's clothes or shoes can quickly contaminate your whole flock.

If a poultry-keeping pal is your only option, provide plenty of disposable boot covers and coveralls for use while caring for your birds.

2. LOOK INTO YOUTH ORGANIZATIONS

Your local 4-H and FFA groups are great sources for finding a chicken sitter. 4-H and FFA kids already show an affinity for animal husbandry and tend to be diligent and dependable. Taking care of your birds while you're on vacation can even serve as an independent project for them.

Just make sure your youthful caregiver has his or her driver's license or a parent willing to serve as a twice-daily chauffeur, and that your sitter specializes in chickens rather than steers, sheep or swine.

3. CHECK WITH YOUR FAMILY MEMBERS

A poultry assistant might be closer than you think. Your family members are undoubtedly accustomed to your everyday routine and can be your chicken sitter while you're away. Check with your sister, your mother-in-law, your uncle or another relative for availability. They might not lavish your flock with love, but they probably understand the emotional ties you have to your birds better than would a stranger.

During a visit to Omaha, we left our 24-year-old son, Michael, in charge of the chickens. To our delight and amazement, all birds survived. Sure, I was swamped by hens demanding treats and TLC the minute I stepped into the



GABRIEL TRUJILLO/STOCK.ADOBE.COM

yard upon our return, but Michael kept them fed, watered and safe — and he cleaned one of the coops, too!

4. HELP TRAIN A NEW PERSON TO BE YOUR ON-CALL SITTER

With the proper guidance, a person with no prior poultry experience can successfully serve as a chicken sitter. A friend, neighbor or even a person from a pet-sitting service might can watch your birds for you, with a little additional tutelage.

Arrange for your caregiver to come out for a walk-through once or twice prior to your departure. This way, they can familiarize themselves with your birds, your coop and your expectations.

Take the time to explain everything, and never assume something is too basic to discuss. Leave a written outline of the daily chicken duties, and include your contact information as well as the name, phone number and address of your preferred farm-supply store just in case supplies run short while you're away. 🐔

Ana Hotaling and her husband, Jae, own FMA Farms, a heritage-poultry farm in southeast Michigan.

Local FFA or 4-H members might be delighted to take on the responsibility of watching your chickens.



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Natural Heat Stress Solutions

Did you know that your chickens are more susceptible to heat than cold? Many chicken-keepers are surprised to learn that their feathered friends struggle more with high temperatures, and it's no wonder: Chickens naturally run hot, with a body temperature of 105 to 107 degrees. When the thermometer climbs and humidity is added to the mix, their ability to cool down is put to the test, making them vulnerable to heat stress and other health issues.

This concern is becoming increasingly important as our planet experiences more extreme heat days. In fact, a recent study by World Weather Attribution and Climate Central researchers, and sourced by the Associated Press, found that climate change has added an average of 41 extra days of dangerous heat worldwide in 2024.

Here in Tennessee, where I live, heat is a huge concern, and I spend more time keeping my flock cool than I do battling any other

issue. And no matter where you live, it's crucial to understand how to keep your flock cool and comfortable during these hotter days. Let's explore some practical and natural strategies to help your chickens beat the heat and stay healthy.

THE DANGERS OF HEAT STRESS

Prolonged exposure to heat can take a serious toll on your flock. Heat stroke is a huge concern that can quickly lead to death if not addressed quickly. Heat stress can reduce egg production, damage internal organs and weaken the cardiovascular system. Over time, it can even suppress the immune system, leaving chickens more vulnerable to infections and parasites.

Broiler chickens, with their rapid growth and high metabolism, are especially at risk. But don't worry — there are plenty of natural strategies (and a little creative ingenuity) to help your flock stay cool, happy and healthy.



Young chicks are especially vulnerable to heat stress. When outside, make sure young chicks have access to fresh water and plenty of shade.



Be sure to set out plenty of water stations for your chickens during the summer months.

COOLING HERBS TO THE RESCUE

Did you know some herbs can actually help lower your chickens' body temperature? A 2016 study published in the *Iranian Journal of Applied Animal Science* found that broilers given dried peppermint powder during heat stress had cooler body temperatures than their unsupplemented flock mates.

Here on our homestead, I grow a ton of peppermint for just this reason. One of the easiest ways to share its benefits with your chickens is to toss fresh sprigs into their water daily. The minty flavor encourages them to drink more, and the natural cooling properties help them beat the heat.

Other great cooling herbs include lemon balm, borage and holy basil (tulsi). You can add these fresh to their water or brew them into a tea. Just let the tea cool completely before serving it to your flock.

WATER IS ESSENTIAL

Water is the ultimate lifesaver in the heat. Without access to fresh, clean water, chickens can dehydrate quickly, and in extreme temperatures, this can turn deadly fast.

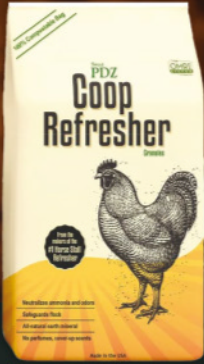
During the summer, I check my flock's water several times a day



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to make sure it's not running low or evaporating too quickly. I also add extra water stations, placing them in shady areas so my birds don't have to wander far to stay hydrated.

LEMON VERBENA & VITAMIN C

When it comes to fighting heat stress in your chicken flock, some surprising allies can be found in your herb garden and vitamin cabinet. A 2016 study published in *Animal Physiology and Animal Nutrition* discovered that adding lemon verbena and vitamin C powder to chicken feed can help reduce the negative effects of heat stress.

Lemon verbena isn't just a lovely herb for making tea; it's also a soothing, natural way to support your flock. Add fresh or dried lemon verbena to their feed, or float sprigs in their water for a double-duty refresher. If you prefer powdered supplements, Poultry DVM recommends giving laying hens 200 to 500 milligrams of vitamin C powder daily during heat waves.

You can also add some freshly squeezed lemon juice to your chicken's water. Lemon juice is a natural electrolyte because it contains potassium, which helps the body maintain a healthy fluid balance.

TURMERIC: A GOLDEN ALLY

Turmeric isn't just for curry night; it's a powerful anti-inflammatory that can help your chickens combat heat stress.

A 2015 study in *Tropical Animal Health and Production* found that turmeric improves stress tolerance and boosts immune response in heat-stressed birds.

More recent research in 2021, published in *Veterinary and Animal Science*, showed turmeric also reduces inflammation and supports growth in broilers during extreme heat.

To incorporate turmeric into your flock's diet, sprinkle about ½ teaspoon per bird into their feed or water on particularly hot days. Since chickens tend to drink more than they eat during the heat, adding supplements to their water can ensure they're getting the full benefits. 🐔

Heather Levin is a writer, educator, herbalist and chicken wrangler of 30-plus chickens. She's also the founder of *The Backyard Chickens Summit* and *Chicken Health Academy*, a pioneering online learning academy that teaches natural and emergency chicken-care strategies. To find out more about the summit and academy, visit www.chickenhealthacademy.com.



This crew is waiting for breakfast! During the summer, I feed my flock right at dawn so they're not digesting the bulk of their food during the hottest part of the day.

**LOOKING FOR
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To the BONE

Maintaining good bone health in laying hens is crucial.

BY DOUG OTTINGER

Eggshell quality and the need for adequate levels of calcium in a laying hen's diet, in order to produce strong shells, is often addressed in poultry books, literature and online circles. What is usually not addressed, however, is the importance of maintaining good bone health in laying hens.

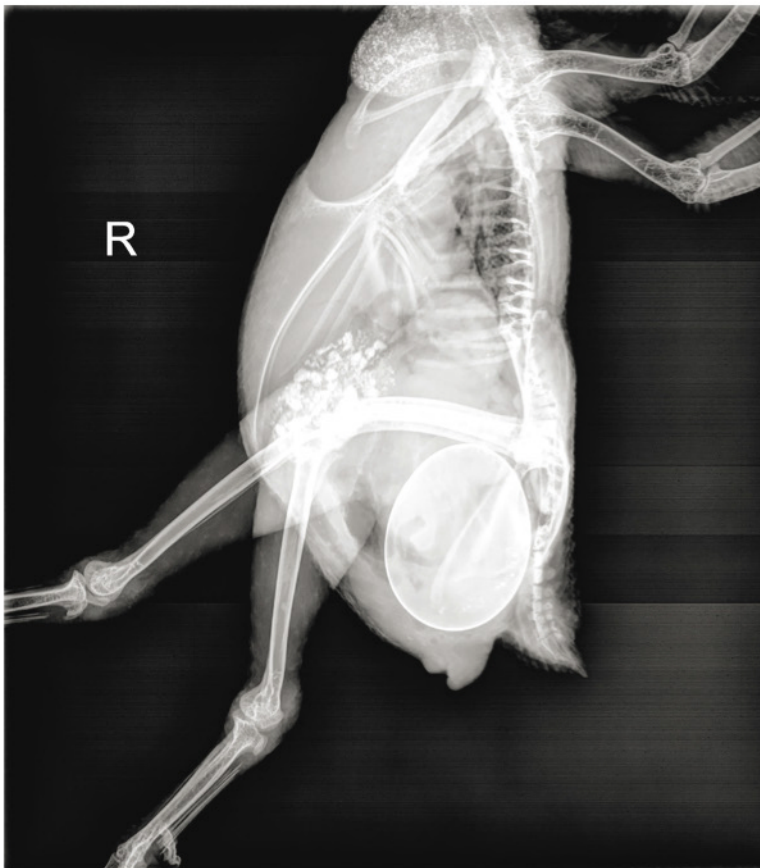
As a hen produces eggs, she uses calcium from her daily feed and mineral intake, and she slowly uses calcium from her own skeletal system as well. By the time a hen is laying weak or soft-shelled eggs, she is showing signs of insufficient calcium in her diet and has usually depleted vast reserves of calcium from her own body.

Avian skeletons, including those found in chickens and turkeys, are unique and complex.

Composed of several types of bony material, a bird's skeleton serves many purposes. It provides a framework for the rest of the muscles and other tissue to anchor to, allowing the bird to stand, walk or fly. Specialized hollow bones, known as pneumatic bones, dramatically lessen the overall weight, making flight easier.

In some birds, the hollow bones are also part of the respiratory system, increasing oxygen storage and processing capability for flight, especially during migration. The skeleton also acts as an integral part of the mineral and pH balancing system (mineral homeostasis). A type of specialized bone structure found in female birds, known as medullary bone, acts as a calcium reservoir and helps supply calcium for eggshell formation.





BIRD BONE STRUCTURE

There are four types of bone structure found in birds.

CORTICAL BONE: This is the hard, solid bone found on the exterior of the long, round bones, such as the femur and humerus, as well as “flat bones” such as the skull, hips and pelvis, and the exterior of the sternum.

TRABECULAR BONE: Sometimes known as “spongy bone,” this is the spongy-looking material inside of the bones. While it may look like a poorly designed honeycomb or air-filled tissue mass, it’s actually a highly designed structure made of rods and plates called “trabeculae.” Trabecula (plural trabeculae) translates to “small beam” in Latin. Seen under magnification, they are arranged in an architectural fashion to give strength to the bone. They’re positioned at the ends of the long bones, such as the femur in the leg, supplying structural strength.

In birds with pneumatic bone structures, the individual trabecula are spaced more widely apart, creating air pockets. Spaces between the

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individual trabecula contain bone marrow. This is where the red blood cells, as well as many of the white blood cells are made.

PNEUMATIC BONE: Unique to birds, pneumatic bones are hollow, or semihollow, air-filled structures that reduce weight for flight. They also act as an extended portion of the respiratory system in many avian species, storing extra oxygen for flight and migration. These bones include the ilium, or hip bones, the humerus in the wing, the keel or breast-bone, the clavicle, some lumbar and thoracic vertebrae, and the occipital bones of the skull.

Not all birds have pneumatic bones. Ostriches, which do not fly, have just a few. Penguins and Puffins, both flightless, diving, ocean birds, have only solid bones. Loons, which fly and migrate, have only solid bones, allowing them to dive to depths of 250 feet in search of food.

MEDULLARY BONE: This highly specialized bone structure is found in female birds, as well as some female reptiles. In birds and reptiles that lay eggs with calcified, hard shells, medullary bone acts as a calcium reservoir to supply the female with a ready source of calcium for the eggshells that she produces.



DMYTRO TITOV/STOCK.ADOBE.COM

Medullary bones in laying hens, ducks and other poultry include the femurs and tibias in the legs, the ulnas in the wings, the scapula or shoulder blades, the pubic bones (which sit at the back end of the ilium or hip bones), ten of the upper ribs and the phalanges or toe bones.

Medullary bone is a woven network of calciferous tissue inside the hollow spaces of the long bones, as well as the other medullary bones mentioned previously. While it resembles

Vitamin D3 is an important nutrient for chickens, especially for chicks and laying hens, so make sure they get some daily sunshine.

The Coop Is Clean—But Are Your Chickens?

You've scrubbed the roosts. Replaced the bedding. Your coop looks pristine! **But here's the dirty truth:** *Even the cleanest coops can host invisible pests.* Internal parasites—like worms—don't leave a mess you can see.



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The eggshell is composed of around 96% calcium carbonate.

a woven network, it isn't thought to be a strength-adding structure, like trabecular bone.

The medullary bone structure in a female bird is built up, broken down and resorbed into her body to aid in eggshell formation, rebuilt and then resorbed again, time after time. This process can happen many times in the bird's life. In a modern laying hen producing many eggs, it's easy to see how she can rapidly decrease bone calcium to dangerous levels. The structure and physiology of medullary bone has only received complex, scientific study over the last five decades or so. There is still much that is being learned.

It was once believed that medullary bone was broken down and released into the female's body

only when dietary calcium was at inadequate levels for eggshell production. Research done at the University of Kentucky, however, found that only about 53% of eggshell calcium was supplied by a hen's current dietary intake. Approximately 47% came from the calcium build-up in the medullary bone.

CALCIUM CONCERNS

High-production hens can have serious skeletal depletions of calcium in very short order if adequate dietary calcium is not supplied. It was once thought that 2½% calcium was sufficient for most laying hens. Today, it's realized that level may be far too low, for high production birds in the prime of production. Current industry standards put necessary calcium levels in laying hen feed at

Some chicken-keepers provide their laying hens with oyster shell as a calcium supplement to their diet.

a minimum 3.5% to 4.8%. Many manufactured laying feeds now meet this level.

Phosphorous is also important in the formation of bone and shell. Calcium and phosphorous go together in this process. Natural sources of calcium, such as oyster shell, also have an adequate supply of phosphorous, so this is something you generally don't need to be overly concerned about.

When medullary bone is resorbed into the body, the bone shape or exterior bone mass does not change. The medullary calcium structure is inside of the hollow sections of the bones, so externally the bones still look the same. In hens with serious calcium depletion, calcium may be pulled from the cortical or hard bone also, leaving the hen vulnerable to broken bones and osteoporosis.

Some of this calcium that is pulled will go back into rebuilding medullary bone in a feeble attempt by the hen's body to bring itself back to proper levels. It's easy to see why adequate dietary calcium in laying hens and other egg-producing poultry is so important.



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A lack of calcium in hens can manifest in several ways, including soft or thin eggshells, aggressiveness, broken bones and/or a drop in egg production.

BONE UP

Here's how to maintain good bone health throughout a hen's lifetime.

FROM HATCHING TO START OF LAYING:

Chicks and young poultry aren't able to process high levels of calcium when young. Feeding high-calcium feeds, such as laying mash to young birds can cause a build-up of calcium in the kidneys and internal organs, resulting in visceral gout and eventual kidney, or renal failure. Kidney damage in poultry is often

imperceptible until the end stages, when a bird that seemed otherwise healthy may suddenly die after only a few days of not looking well.

Maintaining good kidney health in a flock is just as important as maintaining good bone health. Young poultry should have no more than 1% to 1.4% calcium, under normal circumstances, in their diets. This level during the growing period is sufficient to build an adequate skeletal structure in the bird, prior to the start of the first laying cycle.

Be Proactive

Always check the calcium level on the bag of feed when you purchase it. If minimum calcium levels in a bag of laying mash are less than 3.5%, buying a bag of ground oyster shell, as a supplement, and letting the birds consume it, free-choice as needed, is a good idea.

If you allow your birds to free-range and choose to feed scratch grains instead of regular laying mash, make sure that there is a supply of ground oyster shell for them to consume as they desire. There are many different methods for raising and feeding poultry, but an adequate calcium supply is necessary for optimum bone health and eggshell quality.

Unfortunately, most people only offer supplemental calcium after eggshells become thin or eggs are laid with only membranes and no shell at all. Once the hen has gotten to this point, her medullary bone reserves are most likely very depleted.

The growth of medullary bone in female birds is triggered by ovarian steroids and hormones, including both the female hormone, estrogen, and the male hormone, androgen. Production of medullary tissue begins full force about two weeks before a pullet lays her first egg. It is at this time that she should be switched to a laying feed with the higher calcium level.

In commercial flocks, pullets are often switched to an intermediary feed, containing about 2½% calcium for this time. However, since this is rarely available or practical for home use, switching young pullets to layer rations about two weeks before the start of expected egg production is generally satisfactory.

Just like humans, chicks can get rickets (softening and bending of the long bones) if sunlight or vitamin D3 is in short supply. Sunlight or adequate supplemental light is very important when raising chicks.

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Make sure your feed is fresh at all times, as commercial feeds that are too old can lose quality.

DURING THE FIRST LAYING YEAR & BEYOND:

Hens generally produce the strongest eggshells during the first year of laying. As the laying season progresses, you may notice that the shells become thinner over time. This is normal.

In birds (including wild chickens) that are seasonal or clutch layers, the female's body usually gets enough of a break between laying cycles to rebuild medullary bone. Calcium found in nature, whether from animal and insect protein, or from the calcium found in many green plants, is often in sufficient supply

to allow a clutch or seasonal layer to rebuild her medullary supply between laying cycles.

However, in the case of poultry which are bred and raised for egg production, medullary bone can be significantly depleted during a regular laying cycle and supplemental calcium in the diet becomes necessary. A hen which lays for several years will often produce weaker and thinner shells with each ensuing season. This often indicates that her medullary stores are also being depleted. Just as in humans, chickens don't process calcium intake as well, once they get older. Older hens can and do develop osteoporosis and brittle bones.

Being proactive and ensuring that your layers have adequate calcium supplies is just the start. They also require plenty of sunshine or supplemental light for vitamin D production and lots of general love and care. These things will help maintain good shell quality in the eggs they provide and ensure they have healthy bones and skeletal structures for many years. 🐔

Doug Ottinger lives in, and writes from, northwest Minnesota. He has 50 years of experience with poultry and holds a bachelor's degree in agriculture, with an emphasis in avian science.

Feed chicks a starter diet containing at least 18% protein before switching to a layer feed at about 18 weeks.



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Pullet Priming

Getting your young layers off to a great egg-producing start requires more than just switching to a layer feed.

BY KRISTINA MERCEDES URQUHART

*Y*ou've done the research. You've chosen your breeds, and your coop is freshly painted and ready to go. There are egg recipe books stacked high on the kitchen counters, and if you're anything like me with my first flock of chicks, tiny peeping noises are coming from the tub in your bathroom. So, what comes next?

Getting your laying birds off to a healthy start in life sets the stage for how well they'll lay for years to come. As you'll soon see, those tiny fluffy chicks grow in a matter of weeks. Their bodies are designed to grow rapidly and reach maturity quickly while still meeting developmental and physical milestones. But as their keeper, their surrogate mother hen, you have a big responsibility to feed those little bodies. Because one day, they'll feed you.





At some time during bird's first autumn, they'll molt and lose all their feathers. It's natural, and they, of course, grow back.

START AT THE BEGINNING

Chicks need all the elements for proper health and growth that adult birds do — just on a smaller scale. Chicks require adequate space in their brooder, roots to perch on (and practice flying up to, to strengthen legs and wings), fresh water, grit if given treats and, very importantly, the proper feed.

Chick food is different than any other feed your birds will get throughout their lives. They must have food designed especially for their growing bodies. Purchase only chick starter feed for very young birds. The protein level is higher than that for adult birds. The helps chicks keep up with the vast resources it takes to grow so big in a short amount of time while also growing feathers from scratch (so to speak).

KEEP STRESS LOW

Chicks are initially raised in a brooder. Brooders are smaller quarters, usually with soft bedding. (Some people raise chicks on wire mesh, something I don't recommend for long periods of time or the duration of their growth.) This housing is safe from predators — including children, if they live in your household, too — and should be warm, dry and full of fresh food and water at all times.

Chicks need very warm temperatures to grow properly, and they need minimal stress. Keeping predator threats away will go far in raising calm, happy chickens, and less-stressed chickens lay more eggs.

Another factor in raising happy chicks is entertainment. Chickens are social birds, living in family groups or flocks. They establish a pecking order that begins in the first few days of life;

First Molt

At some time during the birds' first autumn, they'll lose all their feathers and look positively disheveled. But don't panic. Unless you can confirm or suspect a true illness or disease, your birds are probably molting.

Molting is a normal process of shedding feathers and regrowing new ones that all birds do. During this time, most egg laying will cease because the process is so taxing on a bird's body. Hens still need to eat quite a bit and probably even need a little protein boost. Mealworms are a great treat, and allowing a chicken to forage for her own bugs on pasture while molting will support her through this annual process.

watch your chicks in the brooder closely, and you'll quickly begin to learn which is the alpha.

It's important to have enough space in the brooder for the birds to move about freely. This gives the more submissive chicks a chance to move away and have their own space from the alpha. Cramped quarters lead to more bullying, and bullying leads to a lot of stress early in life.

Provide your birds with something to do. Give them tiny roosts, such as small tree branches and twigs even when they're tiny, to perch on and practice flying. Provide treats that are age-appropriate, such as blueberries and strawberry ends, as well as chick grit, a digestive aid, if you offer special treats other than feed.

Finally, there's hydration. It seems so simple yet is often overlooked. Laying hens need large amounts of water, not just to fuel their own bodies but also to produce eggs, which are more than 70% water in themselves.

If a hen is dehydrated and goes as little as 24 hours without water, it could significantly affect her health and disrupt her laying for several weeks. Chronically dehydrated hens could be affected for life and never truly recover their egg-laying prowess. Keep fresh water available and accessible to your flock at all times, for their health as much as the eggs they lay.

PRIME TIME & GOOD HABITS

Opinions vary among chicken keepers as to when it's best to switch to layer feed. I switch my birds around 16 weeks of age, or about the time they begin to lay. You'll notice your birds are maturing around this age: They're fully feathered, their wattles are growing and they might even do a crouch position when you go to pick them up. A hen will assume a crouch position when a rooster is about to mate, and that's a signal to you that your birds are sexually mature.

This is the time to have nest boxes ready. The best nest box is dry, warm, soft, dark, quiet and private. For most standard-size birds, 12-by-12-by-12 inches, or a few inches larger, in each direction is a wonderful size.

Getting good laying habits established right away is very important. It's worth repeating: Start your birds off right as soon as you see those first eggs. For the first few weeks of laying, monitor your pullets closely. Look under the roosts, in the corners of the coop and run, and other places a new pullet might make a nest and tuck her eggs. Even if your nest boxes are by-the-book perfect to you, a novice layer might think otherwise.

If you have a wayward layer, try to catch her in the act and move her to a nest box. You might have to do this every day for several



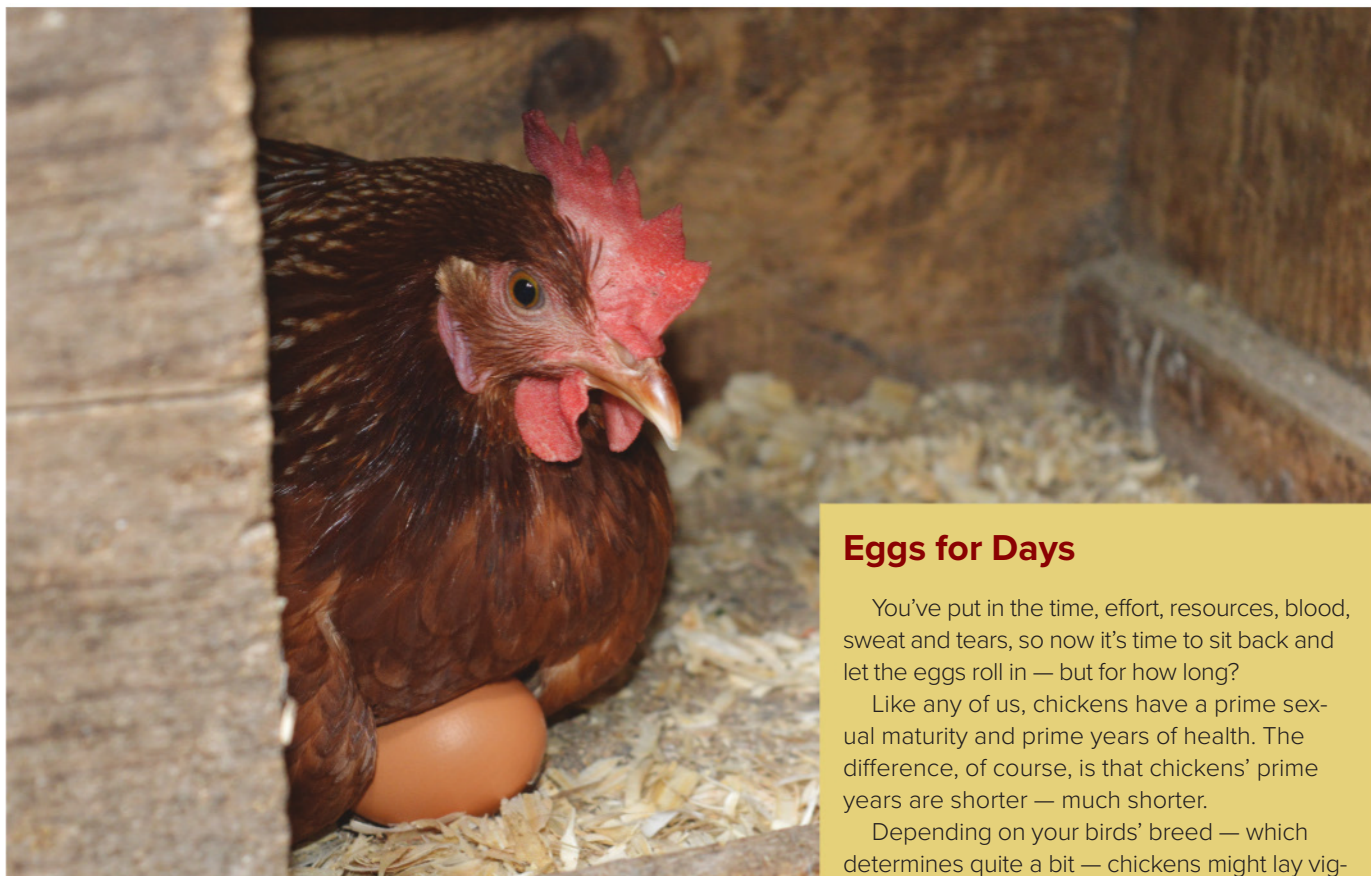
Before a chick can look forward to becoming a laying hen, you'll need to provide her with the proper nutrition to help her grow.

days or weeks before she gets it. But this is an important step in ensuring she knows where to lay. Also try putting some "dummy" wooden eggs or golf balls in the nest boxes to encourage all of the new pullets to lay where you'd like them to, especially if there are no mature and experienced hens already in the flock.

If your pullets free-range, keep them in the coop or outdoor runs connected to the coop where the nest boxes are for the first few weeks until they get used to where to lay. Hens usually — though not always — lay in the mornings, so keep them confined to the coop through the morning for the first few weeks to encourage laying in the right location.

Lastly, keep a close eye on young pullets for bad behaviors, such as egg eating. Often, a young pullet will lay an egg, stand up, surprised, turn around and investigate the egg with her beak. If she breaks it open, she might discover the delicious contents inside, and you'll have an egg eater on your hands in no time.

It's critical stop this behavior right away by collecting eggs frequently and keeping dummy eggs in the nest boxes for them to peck at. It's virtually impossible to "break" a hen of egg-eating behaviors. Start early so the habit doesn't spread to other hens. Egg eating is a contagious habit.



Laying hens need to be fed a layer feed to get proper nutrition.

WHAT TO EXPECT WHEN YOU'RE EXPECTING

There's no disappointment like discover your first egg and it's only about an inch long and without a shell. What is that thing, anyway?

In our easy-access, grocery-store world, we've all been sheltered from the strange and misshapen eggs that young pullets often lay. Sometimes they'll lay teeny tiny "starter" eggs that are no bigger than a nickel. Some birds will lay a gargantuan egg and you'll wonder how it came out of that tiny, young creature. Some eggs are laid without shells, some have rough spots or calcium deposits, while others might have blood spots on the shells or no yolks at all. Each of these possibilities is normal, especially for first-time layers.

To get your pullets accustomed to laying the best eggs possible, make sure they have a high-quality layer feed, as well as calcium and grit supplements, and are kept as stress-free as possible. Naturally, hens that are allowed access to grass and pasture and are allowed to stretch their wings and legs and free-range are happier and lay better quality eggs.

After the first year, a pullet becomes a hen, and her laying is established. As long as the days contain about 14 hours of

Eggs for Days

You've put in the time, effort, resources, blood, sweat and tears, so now it's time to sit back and let the eggs roll in — but for how long?

Like any of us, chickens have a prime sexual maturity and prime years of health. The difference, of course, is that chickens' prime years are shorter — much shorter.

Depending on your birds' breed — which determines quite a bit — chickens might lay vigorously from two to six years. Admittedly, two years of prime production is quite conservative; that is usually the timetable for a factory farm hen to go from layer to "retired."

The great news for you is that hobby and backyard flocks typically lay for a lot longer than factory-farm hens. I have 8-year-old birds that are still laying an egg or two per week, and my 3-to-5-year-old birds lay as many as four eggs per week each.

Your backyard chickens live healthier and happier lives, so they continue their egg laying longer than the factory birds. Count on vigorous laying for at least three years, with a steady decline thereafter. Reference your breed's egg-laying estimates for a better sense of when they'll slow down egg production.

sunlight, she'll lay regularly and as often as her breed dictates. Laying will slow down in winter, as the days get shorter, and just like us, chickens need a bit of a break. A well-cared-for hen will lay reliably, and if she gets a nutritious, varied diet, she'll share the wealth by giving you the healthiest and tastiest eggs you've ever had. 🐔

Kristina Mercedes Urquhart is the author of The Suburban Chicken: The guide to keeping healthy, thriving chickens in your backyard.

Free-range your pullets for even just a part of the day, and they'll find healthy snacks such as bugs and greens that'll make their eggs look and taste better.



Best EGGS



Treating your layer hens to a little TLC and clean surroundings results in delicious, golden-yolked eggs for your morning breakfast.

BY **CHERIE LANGLOIS**

Back in the days before my layer flock came to enliven life on our farm, I would have picked the egg for sure — or maybe the egg carton. After all, the runny, pale-yolked eggs I cooked came from cartons sold at the grocery store, not from any chickens that I could see. My perspective changed, however, when I brought home our first fuzzy chicks, watched them grow into gawky pullets and waited — and waited — with bated breath for our first farm-fresh eggs to magically appear.

I eventually learned that not only did you first need chickens to have eggs (obviously), but to start getting eggs, you also needed your pullets to reach about 20 weeks of age. And to get an ongoing supply of good eggs, your chickens needed the right food, clean nest boxes, sufficient daylight and more. In other words, because an egg's quality reflects the care and management the hen receives, getting good eggs takes some work — and not just on the chicken's part. Take it from anyone who has ever kept a layer flock, the delicious results are well worth the effort.

If you think fun chickens giving delectable eggs every day sounds like a recipe for hobby-farm happiness, our guide to getting good eggs will help you collect the right ingredients.

AP/WIDEWORLD/STOCK.ADOBE.COM





To get dark-orange egg yolks (right), feed your chickens a diet rich in carotenoids, which are pigments found in plants such as marigold petals, alfalfa meal and leafy green vegetables.

WHAT'S IN AN EGG?

Before we look at what should go into a laying chicken, let's talk about what comes out. That amazing chicken egg has a protective, external, porous shell consisting mainly of calcium carbonate covered with an invisible protein barrier called the cuticle that shields the interior from bacterial contamination.

These structures, along with an inner membrane, surround a cushiony, cloudy albumen (the white), composed mostly of water and protein. The albumen in turn envelopes the nutrient-packed yolk, the egg's main nucleus of protein, fatty acids, vitamins and minerals. On average, a chicken egg contains about six grams of protein and six grams of fat.

1. PROVIDE THE BASICS

FOOD: To keep its body functioning and to produce one of these self-contained, nutrient-rich units each day, it's essential a laying hen receive a balanced diet with adequate levels of protein, carbohydrates, fat, vitamins and minerals.

For laying flocks older than 16 to 20 weeks, experts generally recommend a balanced layer ration containing 16% to 18% protein and approximately 3½% calcium to promote strong eggshells.

Many raisers also offer free-choice oyster shell for extra calcium in case their feed falls short of this important mineral. Calcium deficiency can result in thin-shelled eggs and leg problems. You may need to offer your birds the higher-protein feed during periods of peak

egg production and when hot weather causes birds to eat less.

If you keep your flock confined, don't forget to provide them with a source of insoluble grit to assist in grinding the feed in their gizzards. You'll find oyster shell, grit, formulated layer rations and various types of feeders at your local feed-supply store. Some even carry balanced, organic layer diets, if you prefer your flock dine on food free of antibiotics and grown in a sustainable fashion.

Chickens allowed to free-range pastures, orchards, gardens or other outdoor areas will consume a nutritious and diverse mix of insects, grains, berries, seeds and plants in addition to their formulated fare. Many chicken-keepers treat their flocks to other goodies, too, from bread to surplus cow's milk. However, a number of poultry experts advise against this practice.

"A lot of farmers try to save money by feeding scratch grains and household food scraps," says Jacquie Jacob, Ph.D., poultry extension associate at the University of Kentucky. "This dilutes the nutrition of the laying feed and can result in shell weakness or cessation of production altogether."

WATER: Laying chickens also require a constant supply of fresh, clean water. Not only does a chicken's body use this life-sustaining liquid for numerous physiological functions, but water also comprises more than half of an egg's volume. You must ensure your birds have a reliable water source during both hot and dry

periods and freezing weather or their egg production will suffer.

COOP: Along with a balanced diet and ample water, your chickens need protection from the elements, predators and disease to stay alive and healthy — and thus keep laying eggs. A cold, wet chicken, for example, will be forced to spend its energy reserves trying to stay warm rather than on egg production. A sick or stressed chicken will often reduce its egg output or completely quit laying. And it goes without saying that a bird killed by fowl cholera or a coyote won't be giving you any more eggs — ever.

A snug, secure, well-built and properly ventilated coop will offer your flock shelter from bad weather, give your birds a predator-safe spot to roost at night, and discourage the presence of disease-carrying rodents and wild birds.

Outdoor access into a covered coop or pen gives the chickens a protected place to dust bathe, scratch for bugs and preen in the sunshine. However, not all raisers keep their birds cooped round-the-clock; many allow their flocks to free-range around the farm during the day, while others utilize pasture-based systems that incorporate mobile chicken tractors or movable poultry netting.

Both confinement and free-range systems have their pros and cons, Jacob says. Free-ranging birds may have more room and increased opportunities to behave like chickens and forage for a varied, natural diet, but outdoor living does pose definite risks.

“Many people think that having chickens romping around a pasture is idyllic, but they can't imagine all the threats the birds are



Laying hens also require a constant supply of fresh, clean water.



To clean the chicken coop, remove all the bedding and droppings using a shovel, then scrub all surfaces with a mild soap solution, paying attention to corners and perches. Finally, disinfect the coop with an equal parts vinegar-and-water mixture, and add fresh bedding.

exposed to, such as diseases and predators,” says Francine Bradley, Ph.D., an extension poultry specialist with the Department of Animal Sciences at the University of California, who recommends confining layer flocks.

“If your birds are enclosed, you’ll also be able to quickly find the eggs,” she says. “You can supply a clean nest box so the chicken lays there instead of hiding its nest somewhere or laying its eggs in a mud puddle.”

This increases your chances of getting clean eggs from your laying hens.

2. KEEP THE COOP CLEAN

Whichever raising system you use, avoid crowding your chickens and keep their environment as clean and dry as possible.

Regularly layering fresh litter in houses, preventing mud formation in pens and raking up droppings will help prevent your birds from tracking feces and mud into their nest boxes and onto their eggs. Hygienic conditions promote healthier hens, as will paying attention to biosecurity issues, such as quarantine periods for new fowl and limiting visits to your farm from other chicken raisers.

“If a visit is necessary, the farmers should have showered before coming to the farm and should not wear clothing, including baseball caps, shoes and boots that they’ve worn anywhere near their own birds,” Jacob says.

3. PROVIDE NEST BOXES

To get eggs — especially nice, clean, intact ones — you’ll need to persuade your chickens to lay where you want them to lay, not in some poopy corner of their coop or hidden in tall grass somewhere out in the back 40.

Bradley stresses providing plenty of covered nest boxes for your flock; one for every four hens. You can purchase easy-to-clean nest boxes from poultry supply companies or build your own from wood. Install the boxes about 2 feet off the floor and deeply layer each with clean, soft litter, such as nontoxic wood shavings, to provide cushioning for the eggs and to absorb droppings.

“You might want to tack a little cloth over part of the opening to make it secluded and dark. Chickens like this and it will help prevent egg eating,” Bradley says. “You’ll want to put a plastic or rubber egg in the box first to attract the chickens to the nest box.”

For birds allowed outside, Jacob suggests keeping them inside until later in the day so you won’t have to embark on an Easter egg hunt every morning.

Most chickens finish their egg-laying by 10 a.m. or so. Knowing exactly where your birds deposit their eggs will enable you to find and gather the eggs promptly, making it less likely for them to become broken and attract a hungry chicken’s attention.

“Egg eating is a very bad vice and one chicken can teach the others this habit,” Bradley says. “It’s best not to let the habit start to begin with.”

4. SET UP LIGHTS

Light is another important factor that affects egg production and a good many neophyte chicken keepers have been left scratching their heads and wondering why their chickens quit laying as winter set in. (Note: Hens will also cease laying during molting periods.)

“Hens come into production with increasing hours of light per day and go out of production with decreasing hours of light per day,” Jacob says. “A minimum of 14 hours of light per day is necessary to maintain egg production. Timers can be used so that the [artificial] lights don’t have to be on all day; they can come on before sunrise and/or stay on after sunset to maintain the required number of hours of light per day.”

5. CLEAN EGGS WELL

Frequent egg collection coupled with clean, dry, uncrowded nest boxes and coops will go a long way toward keeping your flock’s eggs clean. Not only is a pristine, freshly laid egg a thing of beauty, but it can go right into a carton and into your fridge, no scrubbing required.

“If eggs are found clean, there’s no need to wash them since it would remove the bloom, or cuticle, which is the invisible, protective layer naturally found on eggs,” Jacob says.

But despite our best efforts, sometimes dirty eggs happen. With a small amount of dirt or droppings, you can:

- Dry clean the egg by buffing it off with some fine-grit sandpaper.

- Wet washing, although the normal procedure in commercial operations, can result in bacteria being sucked into the egg if done improperly (for example, in a cold bucket of water).

If you have some really filthy eggs, toss them out to be on the safe side.

As soon as you collect them, stash fresh eggs small-side down in a dated egg carton in the refrigerator. Don’t store them with or near odorous foods such as onions or fish. When cooking with raw eggs, don’t cross-contaminate other foods and always cook eggs thoroughly. Wash your hands afterward with warm water and soap.

Once you figure out the right ingredients, getting good eggs from a small layer flock actually doesn’t take that much time and effort on a daily basis. In fact, it’s a wonder more people don’t keep chickens, given that fresh-from-the-coop eggs look and taste so much better than store-bought. As Golson has discovered, the straightforward recipe for optimal egg production has changed little over the years.

“I have a favorite book, first published in 1895, called *The Biggle Poultry Book*, which gives advice for the ‘urban hennerly,’” she says. “It used to be that most everyone had a few hens in their backyard to provide eggs for the table. The advice that worked then is just as good now: Provide a secure shelter, access to a yard and sunlight, good food, and keep it clean. That’s it!” 🐔

Cherie Langlois is a freelance writer and photographer who tends a petite hobby farm in Washington state.



If your eggs are getting dirty, it's time to change up how you collect them, where the hens are laying them and/or refresh your shavings in their nest boxes.



Cockerel Conundrums

Let's explore the fascinating world of cockerels.

ARTICLE & PHOTOS BY BRUCE INGRAM

THE MOST FASCINATING COCKEREL I've ever encountered strutted about the first day he hatched. He was the scourge of the other cockerel in that hatch, pummeling him into abject submission by the time they were 6 weeks old. The Buff Orpington phenom tried to mate with a hen when he was 8 weeks old. If a pullet rejected his aggressive advances, he viciously pecked her until she submitted.

Alas, the avian dynamo never reached his first birthday to officially become a rooster. One day he killed a hen which resulted in the demon cockerel becoming the main course for a Sunday lunch. Frankly, I felt no remorse dispatching him as his daily *modus operandi* was to sneak attack me from the rear. My wife, Elaine, wouldn't even enter the door to his tyrannical kingdom to gather eggs.

Of course, not all cockerels are like this late, unlamented one. Let's enter the fascinating world of cockerels.



Cockerels fighting, while a frightening thing to watch, is a necessary part of the rooster pecking order. It only becomes serious when one rooster decides that he won't put up with a beta rooster anymore.



JODY/STOCKADORE.COM

RECOGNIZING A COCKEREL

For the last decade or so, we've only raised heritage Rhode Island Reds and during that time have been fortunate to possess several annually broody hens. As such, we've been able to spend a great deal of time observing cockerel and pullet developmental behavior. For example, even after a few weeks of life, cockerels tend to be bolder, more curious and more prone to explore away from the mother hen.

Around 4 to 5 weeks of age, cockerels will begin exhibiting certain aggressive acts — if they haven't already. They'll chest bump each other sometimes and charge but not collide on other occasions. At this time, they also start to appear much more erect in stature than the pullets, and a cockerel's feet will seem just a tad stouter than that of a female's feet.

After a few more weeks of growth, we'll begin to observe that the young males have larger redder wattles and combs, and those feet are well on their way to becoming what we jokingly call clodhoppers — a rural term for big, heavy shoes or in this case feet. Those feet will sometimes

boast visible little nubs — the future spurs. The males will also possess longer, more pointed tail feathers, but, honestly, we feel this is one of the hardest traits to correctly identify.

A trait that is easy to identify, though, is the “evil eye stare” which is when two cockerels lock eyes with each other and ominous gazes are exchanged and sometimes blows. Individuals also head for higher ground or perches on occasion as a dominance ritual.

By this point, we have seriously begun, as well, the selection process as in which cockerel might be considered as a future flock leader. This bird or birds receives a red or blue ring around one of his legs, as in he will be spared from the pan, at least for now. Young males that are noticeably smaller, more withdrawn, or low on the hierarchy will receive a dark ban. When week nine arrives, and we are absolutely sure that what we now call teenager cockerels are indeed males, we begin the culling process.

We have never made a mistake when culling a cockerel at 9 weeks. All males dispatched have had the differentiating two testes situated along their backbone, confirming their sexuality. However, several times when our chickens were 5 or 6 weeks old, we were sure that a bird or two was a cockerel, but the individual turned out to be a feisty pullet. That's why you shouldn't be too hasty with the culling process.

THE NEXT STAGE

By the time a cockerel is 3 months old or so, he is long past being deferential to the mother hen. He also has become obsessed with chasing the flock's pullets and awkwardly trying to mate them, often unsuccessfully corralling or mounting them. That “whole balance thing” seems to be a tricky gambit for many males. This is also the time when our young males try to bellow out their first crows.

Alpha, our kind of cockerel, takes his place about Junior below him — a typical cockerel gambit.



Culling Cockerels

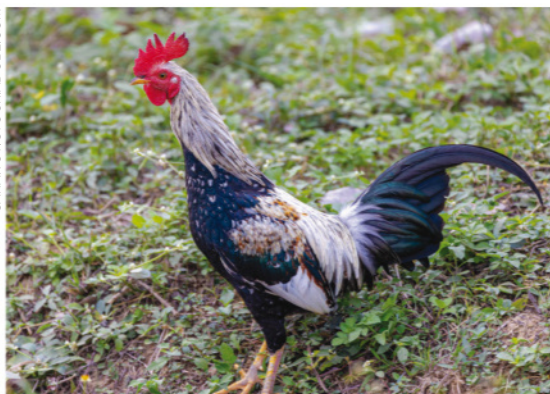
When it comes time to cull a cockerel, it's best done about a half hour before sunrise. It's less stressful on the bird — and chicken-keeper — when he is removed from the roost and dispatched well away from the roost, again in the dark.

The initial cock-a-doodle-dos come out sounding more like a raven's croaks than a proud chanticleer's clarion call. But if there is one aspect of cockerel behavior that is consistent is that our young boys will continue to try to pronounce that first perfect crow. Usually about three weeks after those first tentative crows are made, one morning our young hero will belt out a fully syllabled, thunderous crow.

That vocalization communicates to every rooster up and down our valley that there's a new sheriff in town, and he is a force of nature. A few more weeks will pass, and, sure enough, a cockerel will deduce that if his beak holds on to the back neck feathers of a hen, the mounting and balancing act is much more doable.

Indeed, a cockerel's breeding abilities are legendary in the animal world. These young males can easily mate 25 to 30 times in a day, which sometimes seems low. I've observed cockerels mating six times in an hour, for example.

SARAWUT/STOCK ADOBE.COM



Always wear long pants and tall boots when around an aggressive rooster, and consider carrying a deterrent like a spray bottle of water.

By this time, a cockerel is also the undisputed master of the run, subduing the mother hen and his many sisters.

Sometime during the summer, a cockerel will reach his first birthday and officially become a rooster — the alpha rooster if he is the sole male in his run. If he is protective of his hens, a faithful watchdog of the yard and driveway, and tolerant of Elaine and me within his run, he can rule the proverbial roost for three years. I've learned from past regal roosters that their sperm is much less potent after that third year. Then it's time to crown a new king of the run and restart the whole selection and culling process. 🐔

Bruce and Elaine Ingram are authors of Living the Locavore Lifestyle, a book about hunting, fishing, gathering for food, recipes and raising chickens. Contact him at bruceingramoutdoors@gmail.com.



The author, Bruce Ingram (left), with 6-month-old Junior, who won the competition to become the keeper cockerel.

Alpha (far left) leads his flock down the ramp. Can you spot the subordinate cockerel, Junior, at the end of the line?



Summer SAFETY

Summer's heat can be difficult on your chickens. Keep your flock cool, calm and collected with mindful chicken-keeping.

BY KRISTINA MERCEDES URQUHART

The sweltering, sultry, stifling days of summer are almost upon us, and I am fully in my element. I don't know about you, but I crave the heat when it's the dead of winter. Once the summer arrives, I look forward to all the ways to soak the sun — and vitamin D! — deep into my bones before the wind starts to howl and the leaves begin to change again.







Depending on where you live, the summer months may usher in waves of extreme dryness or wetness.

Like all of us, chickens reap enormous benefits from sunshine, too, but they aren't too keen on the heat itself: In fact, serious heat can be downright deadly to your feathered friends. It's not a personal preference on their part; most of our laying breeds are simply not designed to tolerate heat as well as cold, and without proper supports in place, they may pay the ultimate price for it.

1. WATCH THE WEATHER

Just as you would during winter, monitor weather patterns during those dog days of summer. Learn to anticipate weather extremes for your area, figure out how they'll impact your poultry, and act; you don't want to be caught off guard when a heat wave hits!

Depending on where you live, the summer months may usher in waves of extreme dryness or wetness along with the climb in heat. Extremely damp conditions, especially if they persist for days or weeks on end, can create the breeding grounds for pests and disease, such as coccidiosis, that could harm your birds. During wet, hot weather, provide them with a covered, dry area to get out of the elements and keep their feet and feathers dry.

2. KEEP THE AIR MOVING

Airflow is the enemy of heat. OK, that may sound like an ancient proverb, but it's not. The science, however, is sound. Keep air moving — ideally moving hot air out of the coop and moving cool air in — to give your birds relief from the heat. I'm not suggesting you rig up a fancy air-conditioning system for your chickens. It's much simpler than that.

Every coop should have adequate ventilation in place, especially for hot summer nights when birds are roosting together, generating more heat than any single bird would. In addition to built-in ventilation, pop open the doors, if they have wire mesh covering them to protect from predators.

A good coop ventilation system isn't only a summertime investment. In fact, ventilation is just as important during the winter months when unventilated coops can cause an excess of moisture to build up, and that brings its own set of problems. Consider this investment of infrastructure a lifelong, all-season one.

3. EXPLOIT THE SHADE

Beating the heat often means getting out of the sun. Even with the biggest and fanciest coop, sporting all the bells and whistles, most

chickens will want to spend their days out foraging or roaming out of doors. Under the shade of a roofed run, chickens can get out of the sun's rays during the hottest part of the day. But if your flock pastures in large open areas, they may not have a shady place for respite. It's easy to create shade, though:

- Move portable fencing to an area with bushes or trees that offer cover.
- Plant bushes or trees in your chicken's (uncovered) run or outdoor enclosure.
- Provide your chicken flock with a small structure, such as a repurposed doghouse or children's playhouse.
- Put up a shade umbrella, sunshade or similar structure. If you would take it to the beach, it'll do the trick for your birds.



What If The Heat Beats Us?

Even when the best systems are in place, some chickens still succumb to the heat. Old or sick birds are the most likely victims of heat exhaustion and dehydration, but others, such as birds low in the hierarchy that are being kept from the water by alphas, are potentially at risk, too.

Conduct a quick visual check of your birds each day, especially on days of extreme weather. Some early signs of dehydration include:

- panting with beak open (pictured)
- wings held out from the sides of the body
- pale combs and wattles
- labored breathing
- cease in laying in hens
- diarrhea

Of course, some of these symptoms are indicative of other ailments, so take those signs as an overall guide, not a hard-and-fast list. Remember, being a chicken keeper is a bit like being a detective!

If you discover that a bird shows signs of heat exhaustion and/or dehydration, remove her from the flock. Calm her by placing her in a dark, quiet, cool room — a basement or laundry room is great. Offer water with electrolytes, such as water lightly sweetened with honey or sugar, and moistened feed, and guide her beak to the water if she doesn't find it for herself. Many birds in the throes of dehydration, if caught early and promptly treated, can bounce back within 24 hours.



Learn to anticipate weather extremes for your area, figure out how they'll impact your poultry, and act; you don't want to be caught off guard when a heat wave hits!

ZEN Z PABION MARTINSTOCK.ADOBE.COM



Ventilation is crucial in the summer months to keep the coop cool.

• Place shady spots and reliable cover in a flock's ranging area doubles by providing much-needed cover from aerial predators, too.

4. FEED FROZEN TREATS

Are we going a little over the top here? Maybe, but your girls work hard to lay those beautiful eggs, so why not treat them when they need a little pick-me-up most? In fact, in times of extreme heat, hens may feel so stressed (or dehydrated) that their bodies put the pause on reproductive functions — which means no eggs. So, it's in everyone's best interest to pamper your ladies a bit, right?

Freezing water can be as simple as dropping a few ice cubes in your flock's water font. Freezing treats takes a bit more thought and

planning. When choosing foods to freeze, think of fruits and veggies with high water content that freeze easily and cleanly. A few favorites include:

- watermelon halves
- a variety of berries
- applesauce
- yogurt

As with any treat, remember that moderation is the key. As delicious as they are, treats should never take the place of age-appropriate feed.

5. SKIP THE SCRATCH

Commercial chicken treats, in the form of cracked corn or scratch, are great at bulking up birds for cold weather. The consumption of such treats increases body heat, which is

a great thing in the dead of winter. However, what makes it great in the cold is exactly why it should be avoided during the warmer months. Skip the scratch in the summer, and offer greens from the garden, vegetable kitchen scraps, mealworms, sprouted seeds or another green, protein-packed treat instead.

6. PROVIDE A CONTINUOUS CLEAN WATER SUPPLY

It should almost go without saying, right? Fresh water is an absolute must for beating the heat, and — in addition to protecting your chickens from predators — supplying clean drinking water is the most important tenet of keeping chickens. While fresh water is critical in all seasons, chickens can go downhill very quickly in a very short amount of time without water during hot weather. Dehydration is the fastest killer of chickens (other than predators, of course!).

The solution is simple: Provide ample fresh water for your entire flock daily during the summer. If you find that your birds go through their water faster than a day, dish out the dough and invest in a larger waterer or several

water fonts placed throughout the chicken coop or run.

If there's any chance you won't be able to get to the coop to water them daily, having these additional watering stations set up can be a lifesaver — literally! When it comes to water, too much is always better than too little.

7. SELECT THE RIGHT BREEDS

Some of your heat-beating precautions will begin before you even have chickens to care for. It's important to thoroughly research the best breeds for where you live and then only choose breeds suitable to your climate.

The good news is that there are more than 160 chicken breeds, and whether you keep birds for meat, eggs, for show or ornamentally, there are breeds that suit hot and cold climates. Some favorite warm-weather breeds include Welsummers, Silkies, Leghorns, Naked Necks and many game breeds. 🐔

Kristina Mercedes Urquhart is the author of The Suburban Chicken: The Guide to Keeping Healthy, Thriving Chickens in Your Backyard. She lives with her husband, menagerie of animals, and two daughters in Asheville, North Carolina.

When free-ranging, be sure that your gals have access to fresh water and shade.



DUSAN KOSTIC/STOCK.ADOBE.COM

Eggs + Chocolate =

Bliss

Our resident chef pairs two of our favorite foods for eggceptional treats.

RECIPES & PHOTOS BY SIGNE LANGFORD

When you put two of nature's most perfect, versatile, and delicious ingredients together — decadent chocolate and the freshest eggs — amazing things are bound to happen. Here are a few of our favorite recipes with eggs and chocolate.

White Chocolate Maple Crème Brûlée

Brûlée means burnt. Usually that's not a good thing, but in this case, it's one of the most adored aspects of crème brûlée: a torched sugar crust that you should be able to smash with a spoon for the classic shatter that contrasts so beautifully with the creamy perfection of the interior.

The baking time is variable and comes down to the depth of the dish. Some ramekins are wide and shallow, some are deeper. The deeper the dish, the longer the cooking time. Still, the wobble touch test is the best way to tell when they're done; lightly touch the center and if it's still wiggly but the rest is set, it's done. It'll continue to set up as it cools. Cook it too long, and it'll be rubbery.

YIELD: 4 servings

INGREDIENTS

- 2 cups whipping or 35% cream
- 4 ounces white chocolate, coarsely chopped or snapped into squares
- 1 teaspoon maple extract
- 4 egg yolks
- ¼ cup sugar plus more for the brûléed top; vanilla sugar is extra good

PREPARATION

Preheat the oven to 325 degrees Fahrenheit.

Arrange ramekins in a roasting pan; set aside.

In a saucepan over medium heat, bring cream to a simmer; remove from heat, add chocolate and whisk

until the chocolate melts and the mixture is smooth. Add the extract and stir to combine.

Meanwhile, in a medium bowl, with electric beaters or whisk, cream the yolks and sugar until pale and fluffy. A stand mixer with the whisk attachment is super convenient for this.

Temper the yolk and sugar mixture by starting a very slow drizzle of the hot cream and chocolate, while still whisking briskly. Don't scramble the yolks! Continue with a slow drizzle until completely combined.

Set a fine sieve over a jug or bowl with a handle; pour the custard mixture through to catch any cooked yolk or chalazae bits, then pour the mixture into the oven-safe ramekins, pots, cups or jars.

Bring a kettle of water to a boil; pour hot water into roasting pan, about half-way up the ramekins and bake for 30 to 40 minutes — depending on the size of the ramekin — or until the custard still has a little wobble. Transfer ramekins from water bath to counter until room temperature, then chill in the fridge. If not eating the same day, cover tightly.

When ready to serve; preheat broiler to low, sprinkle the tops of each with about 1 to 2 teaspoons of sugar and set under the broiler for a couple of minutes or until sugar is golden and molten. Don't look away for a second; the sugar goes from golden to black in a flash! If you have a kitchen torch, it offers more control.

Garnish with chocolate shavings or fresh berries.



Chocolate Meringues

These delicate, naturally gluten-free treats can be fancy or down-home; piped or spooned; large or bite-size. Bonus: Once you have chocolate meringues, you can make delightful cream- and fruit-topped pavlova.

YIELD: 12 cookie-sized meringues

INGREDIENTS

- 4 egg whites
- ½ cup cocoa powder; sifted
- 2 cups powdered sugar
- optional garnishes: powdered sugar, cocoa powder, melted chocolate, whipped cream and fruit

PREPARATION

Preheat oven to 200 degrees Fahrenheit.

Line a cookie sheet with parchment paper; set aside.

Wipe out the stand-mixer bowl with a drop of vinegar or lemon juice. Any trace of fat in the bowl will inhibit the whites from fluffing up.

Add the whites and with the whisk attachment, whip on medium-high until foamy.

When foamy, add about half of the icing sugar, then add the cocoa, continuing to whisk. Add the rest of the sugar and continue to whisk until stiff and glossy.



Here is where you get to choose fancy or free-form, big or small. If you want to make little “kisses” use a piping bag. If you want to make individual “cookies” use a large spoon; if you want one big family-style meringue to use as the base of a Pavlova, again you can pipe in a spiral or

roughly spread out into a relaxed circle. For this recipe we made individual “cookies” that can be enjoyed out of hand or topped with fruit and whipped cream. They can also be dipped in melted chocolate.

The cooking time will depend on the size of the meringues, but for this recipe we baked them for about 2 hours; kisses would take about half the time. Test to see if they’re ready by trying to pry one off the parchment. You’ll know they are ready when they lift easily and cleanly from the parchment. Garnish as desired.



Fudgy Flourless Chocolate Cake

This is one of those elegant, restaurant-worthy cakes, impossibly moist and fudgy in the middle with chewy edges. This recipe is super rich on its own, but a wee scoop of vanilla ice cream or homemade whipped cream would be perfection, or simply dust with a little powdered sugar.

YIELD: one 9-inch cake, serves 8 to 10

INGREDIENTS

- ½ cup butter
- 227 grams semisweet chocolate; use the best quality baking chocolate with at least 75% cocoa

- 5 room-temperature eggs, separated
- 1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
- ¼ cup dark cocoa powder
- ¼ teaspoon fine sea salt
- ¾ cup sugar

PREPARATION

Preheat oven to 350 degrees Fahrenheit.

Line a 9-inch cake pan with parchment, bottom and sides; set aside.

In a large bowl over a pot of simmering water on medium heat (or in the microwave) melt the butter and chocolate; stir often until completely melted and smooth. Remove from heat and allow to cool somewhat — about 5 minutes — then add yolks and whisk briskly to prevent lumps of cooked yolk.

Whisk in vanilla, cocoa powder, and salt, whisk until lump-free; set aside.

In the bowl of a stand mixer or large bowl (using an electric beater), whip the egg whites. When foamy, add the sugar ¼ cup at a time; continue to beat to glossy stiff peaks. Remember, always wipe out the bowl with a clean cloth and a drop of vinegar to get the best results when whipping egg whites.

Gently fold the whites into the chocolate in a couple of batches; try to not knock all the air out of the whites.

Pour the batter into prepared pan; smooth out, don't bang the pan as with other cake batters.

Bake for 30 minutes or puffy. Allow to cool for 45 minutes before slicing or it will fall apart.

Once the cake has fallen and cooled, dust with more cocoa or icing sugar, if desired.



Super-Eggy Chocolate Almond Ice Dream

This frozen dessert is so rich and creamy, it's difficult to believe it's dairy-free. And, it's versatile. The "custard" can be frozen and churned or treated like a chocolate pudding and poured into little cups to chill. When it's still warm, it makes a great chocolate sauce for a sundae!

YIELD: Makes about 3 cups

INGREDIENTS

- 3 free-range egg yolks
- 1 free-range egg
- 2½ cups chocolate almond milk (or another milk), dark chocolate is best

- 2 tablespoons butter or coconut fat
- ½ cup pure maple syrup
- ¼ teaspoon fine sea salt
- ½ cup dark cocoa powder

PREPARATION

In a large bowl, whisk the egg yolks and egg until well beaten; set aside.

In a medium saucepan over medium-low heat, add the milk, butter, maple syrup and salt and sift in the cocoa powder to eliminate any lumps.

Bring to a gentle simmer, stirring often to prevent sticking and scalding. Simmer for about 5 minutes, stirring often, then remove from heat; set aside.

To temper the eggs, add a tiny bit of the hot milk mixture to the beaten eggs a few drops at a time, while whisking. If you add too much hot liquid, too fast, you will have scrambled eggs.

Keep doing this until you've added about half of the hot liquid to the eggs, then pour this into the saucepan with the hot mixture and whisk to combine fully.

Return to low heat and simmer for 5 minutes, stirring constantly, until the custard has thickened somewhat; remove from heat. It may seem too thin, but it will continue to thicken as it cools.

If you are concerned there might be some tiny lumps of cooked egg or chalazae, pour the mixture through a fine sieve into a bowl or jug.

Now, here's where we have decisions to make: Do you want to use it warm as a chocolate sauce? Or how about as a pudding? Or are we holding out for ice cream?

FOR ICE CREAM: place the custard in the fridge to chill for at least 3 hours, then add to your ice cream maker and follow the manufacturer's directions.

FOR PUDDING: pour the mixture into little cups, bowls or jars, cover and chill.

FOR HOT FUDGE SAUCE: Keep it in the refrigerator, and warm it up, as needed.



DONNA GRIFFITH

Double Chocolate Pecan Coconut Macaroons

Gloriously gluten-free, these macaroons are simple to make and super-satisfying to eat. These are drop cookies, so make them big or small, just keep in mind, the smaller they are, the faster they bake. We've made a batch of big ones that are chewy inside and crispy around the edges.

YIELD: 1 to 2 dozen depending on the size of each cookie

INGREDIENTS

- 5 free-range egg whites
- ½ cup sugar
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- ¼ cup runny honey
- ¼ teaspoon fine sea salt
- ¼ cup dark cocoa powder
- 3½ cups sweetened shredded coconut
- ½ cup coarsely chopped raw pecans
- ½ cup dark, milk or white chocolate chunks

PREPARATION

Preheat oven to 325 degrees Fahrenheit.

Line 1 or 2 baking sheets with parchment; set aside.

Into the bowl of a stand mixer with the whisk attachment, or into a large bowl, using electric beaters, beat the egg whites, sugar, vanilla, honey, and salt until foamy and the sugar is almost all dissolved — about 3 minutes.

Add cocoa powder and mix until fully incorporated.

Add the coconut, pecans, and chocolate; blend by hand just enough to combine.

Arrange on prepared cookie sheet. For each cookie, use about 3 tablespoons of batter, form well so they hold together, and give about 2 inches space between each for spreading. For big ones, an ice cream scoop or handful is about right.

Bake for 15 to 20 minutes — less or more time depending on cookie size — rotating the pans at the halfway point for even cooking. Allow the cookies to cool completely on the pans before lifting, as they are crumbly when warm; for a real treat, crumble some warm ones on top of vanilla ice cream!



Dairy-Free Chocolate Pudding

This astonishingly simple, rich and creamy dessert is made with eggs and melted chocolate and not too much more. It's a classic French recipe not well-known in North America, but together, we can fix that! All the sharp edges of bittersweet or dark chocolate are rounded off by the richness of the eggs. This can be made a day or two before and kept covered in the fridge.

YIELD: 6 small servings

INGREDIENTS

- 6 ounces dark chocolate, coarsely chopped; 75% cocoa is ideal, but you can use anywhere from 60% to 85% and it'll be fine.
- 4 eggs, divided
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- pinch fine sea salt

PREPARATION

Add chopped chocolate to the top of a double boiler, bowl of a bain-marie, or into a microwaveable bowl; melt but don't overheat or it will become grainy. If using microwave, use low setting, check and stir often as it can burn. Once melted, set aside.

With a drop of lemon juice or vinegar, wipe out the bowl of a stand mixer or large bowl, add the egg whites, and beat until stiff peaks form. If using a stand mixer, use the whisk attachment.

In a separate bowl, add the yolks, sugar, vanilla and salt and whisk together by hand.

By now the melted chocolate should be cool enough to add to the yolk mixture a little bit at a time to temper the yolk; add a spoonful and whisk quickly. We don't want scrambled yolks! Add the rest of the chocolate to the yolks, whisking well to fully combine until smooth.

With a rubber spatula, stir whipped whites into the chocolate yolk mixture and fully combine. It will look a little lumpy, and that's ok.

Transfer the pudding into tiny individual bowls, cups, or jars, then chill in the fridge for about an hour before serving. Add a dollop of whipped cream if desired, but this stuff is rich enough on its own. ♡



Signe Langford is a chicken-keeper, a gardener and a chef. She is the author of Happy Hens & Fresh Eggs: Keeping chickens in the kitchen garden, with 100 recipes.



ONE COOL

Coop

What's more magical than fresh eggs, those little oval spells of super nutrients that appear overnight? The suburban Minnesota hens that conjure this magic are members of our backyard flock: the CovHen. The hens are all named after witches. Edalyn is a Midnight Majesty Marans; Luz, a Lavender Orpington; Lilith, a Speckled Sussex; and Willow, an Ameraucana.

My husband, Matthew, and I built our backyard coop from scratch, following a pattern and decorating it with all things witchy. The chicken witches have an apothecary for their herbs and treats, a black cauldron for water, Midsommar wallpaper in the henhouse, spell books and pentacles, a scrying mirror, crystal ball, and chicken-sized tarot cards and brooms.

The outside of the coop features skulls, ghosts, a gargoyle and crystals for protection. Celestial powers are called on, as well, for the solar-powered cameras and henhouse door. Hanging herbs offer good smells, health benefits, and bug repellent.

Our dream is to someday have land for our hobby farm and larger flock, but for now, our suburban yard has the space for four hens. We picked up the chicken witches when they were one day old from the local farm store, Eggplant, along with recommendations for research books and social media accounts to guide us. It's been a wonderful learning experience, and we love being a part of the chicken-owner community. Check us out on social media (#TheCovHen)! 🐔

— Jenna Silber, Minnesota





TELL US ABOUT YOUR COOP!

Email us a short write-up (~250 words) about your chicken coop along with a few images to chickens@chickensmagazine.com with the subject line **One Cool Coop**, and include your name and mailing address.

We'll send one person a prize package of Frenzy Products (total approximate value \$60): 30-ounce Mealworm Frenzy, 30-ounce Double Frenzy and Free Range Feast Spice Blend from our sponsor, **Happy Hen Treats** (www.happyhentreats.com)!



NO PURCHASE NECESSARY TO ENTER. Contest is open to legal residents of the 50 United States or District of Columbia, age 21 or older. Entries must be received between 12:00:01 a.m. PT on 6/25/2025 and 11:59:59 p.m. PT on 8/25/2025. See Official Rules on page 64. Void where prohibited by law. Sponsor: EG Media Investments LLC

And the winners are!

Here are the winners and some honorable mentions in each of the five categories of our annual **Best of Cluck** photo contest.



Winner!

Anne Vaughn
Charlotte, North Carolina

Cutest Chick

Sponsored by **Hobby Farms & EG Media**
Winning Prize: a \$50 gift card, a 1-year subscription to *Hobby Farms* magazine and a copy of *Best of Hobby Farms 2025*.

Runner Up

Dustin Rhoades • Newcastle, California





Winner!

Hanna Bomblies
Williston, Vermont

Best Group

Sponsored by *Chickens* magazine & EG Media
Winning prize: \$25 gift card to buy more chickens!



Runner Up

Hunter Schulz • Monroe, Washington



Winner!

Scarlett Jerry
Sheridan, Wyoming



Best Hen

Sponsored by
Brinsea Products
(www.brinsea.com)

Winning prize: A ChickSafe Eco Automatic Chicken Coop Door (pictured, retail value: \$150). This tough and reliable system automatically opens the coop door in the morning and closes it in the evening as light levels fall, keeping your birds safe and giving you peace of mind.



Brinsea
Incubation Specialists

Runner Up

Debby Dathe • Minneapolis, Minnesota



Winner!

Renee Hinckley
Yamhill, Oregon

Runner Up

Tiffany Jerry • Sheridan, Wyoming

Best Rooster

Sponsored by **Murray McMurray Hatchery**
(www.mcmurrayhatchery.com)

Winning prize: a \$100 gift certificate to Murray

McMurray's online store for poultry and/or other merchandise. Murray McMurray Hatchery provides the highest quality poultry and auxiliary products to their customers, and have been a trusted, knowledgeable industry resource for more



than 100 years. Whether you are an experienced or novice enthusiast, you will enjoy its wide selection of breeds and supplies to assist you with raising your flock.





Winner!

Debby Dathe
Minneapolis, Minnesota

Cooler Coop

Sponsored by **Chickens** magazine & EG Media

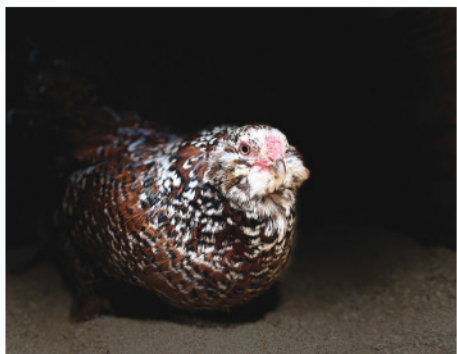
Prize: \$50 gift card to buy more chickens!



Runner Up

Jennica Harris/Boujee Beaks Egg Farm
Chesterville, Maine

Honorable Mentions



Danielle Rhoades
Newcastle, California



Hanna Bomblies
Williston, Vermont



Danielle Rhoades
Newcastle, California



Anne Elle



Scarlett Jerry
Sheridan, Wyoming



Scarlett Jerry
Sheridan, Wyoming

Honorable Mentions



Danielle Rhoades
Newcastle, California



Hanna Bomblies
Williston, Vermont



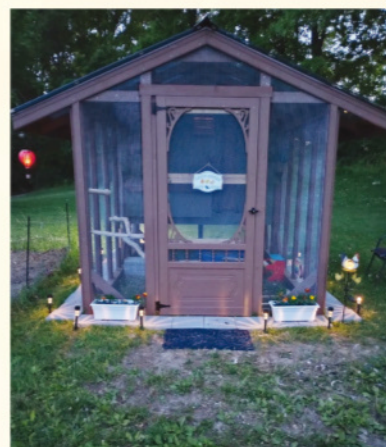
Anne Lee Vaughn
Charlotte, North Carolina



Andrea du Manoir
Pacific, Missouri



Anna Stemberger
Shelbyville, Tennessee



Karen Lafond
Fort Ann, New York

Honorable Mentions



Jenee Winegard
Greenville, New York



Mary Smith
Goldsboro, North Carolina



Jennica Harris/Boujee Beaks Egg Farm
Chesterville, Maine



Emily Walton
Stella, North Carolina



Anne Elle



Audrey House
Port Charlotte, Florida

wing tip

Keep your flock cool this summer with these chilly tips.

Here in Louisville, Kentucky, we can experience long strings of days hitting 90 degrees or higher with 80% humidity long before the hottest part of the afternoon. Along with our urban-air-quality alerts, outside is generally intolerable from sunup until after dinnertime. If you're reading this from someplace that never gets cold, such as the dry Southwest, and your flock has never had a problem with heat, that's because they've adapted to their consistent environment.

In general, chickens can take the heat — they're descendants of jungle fowl — but larger, heavier breeds and breeds with feathered feet don't tolerate heat as well as lighter weight breeds. Heavy birds need extra care during heat spikes. High temperatures and dehydration can be dangerous, and sudden temperature changes can be deadly. Here's what you can do to cool your flock through the summer's hottest days.

1. KEEP WATER FRESH & COLD

Watering your chickens should go without saying, but when the weather's hot, keep on top of the water source. Get outside to give the flock fresh, cold water, and if you can, position it somewhere out of direct sunlight, preferably where the chickens spend their time staying cool.

Shade will keep the water cool a little longer, and your flock won't have to wander into the hot sun for a drink. Supplement with electrolytes, as well.

2. SCOOPED OUT WATERMELON

Everyone enjoys a cold treat when it's hot outside. Your chickens are certainly no different. Watermelon is one of my favorite treats to give hens to help them in the heat. I halve and scoop out the watermelon with a melon baller (for the humans), and that leaves some fruit leftovers right inside a natural "bowl" for the girls.

The truth is, I leave a bit extra for the chickens. Then, I put the cold, leftover watermelon a shady spot in the yard and let the chickens clean it off. They'll eat it almost all the way down to the green, and what's left goes in the compost bin.

3. OVERRIPE FRUITS

Last week, I bought a bag of apples that weren't very good, which isn't surprising because it's not apple season. These have been around a while. I've kept them in the fridge, and every so often I wash one, cut it in half, and throw it out into the yard.

4. FROZEN TREATS

Chickens love to peck treats out of ice. As the ice melts in the heat outside, chickens peck their way to cold treats. Most recently, I've seen someone freeze canned corn and water in a muffin pan, but electrolytes could be added to the frozen treat, too. Your flock will enjoy any treat you usually feed them in a frozen form. 🐔

Rachel Hurd Anger is an urban farming writer with particular interests in biodiversity.

Chickens should have cool water available to them all around the farm or yard.



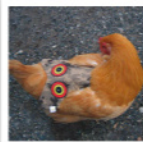
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Watermelon is a hydrating fruit that has natural electrolytes to help keep chickens cool and hydrated during dry spells and high temperatures. They'll even enjoy munching on the seeds. The rinds are perfectly safe, as well.

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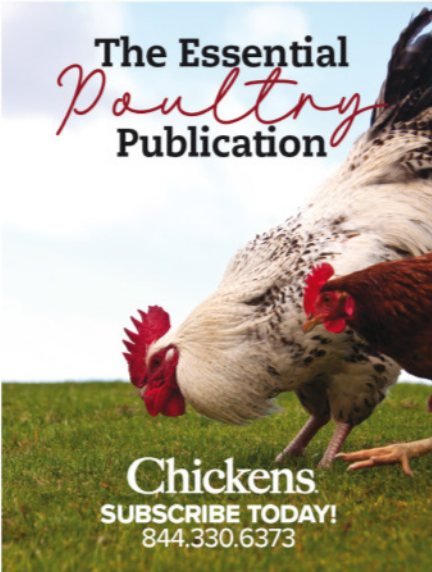



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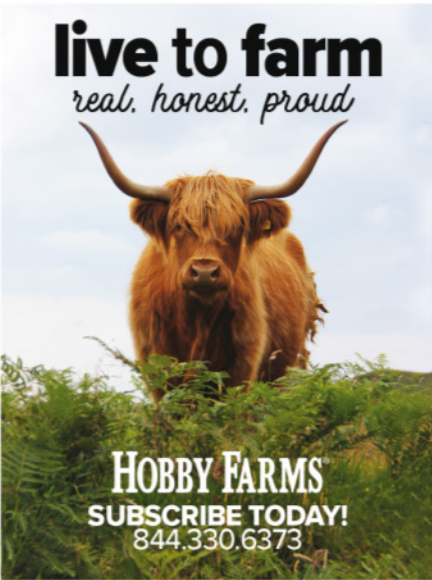
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First, you might want to ask yourself why your chickens keep escaping from their designated area. Your chickens might not have enough space to explore and they simply need a bigger run. Or, they could be on the hunt for more food, or a fresh green area to scratch and find bugs or some tasty leaves to enjoy. Try providing your chickens with enough food and space to keep them content.

Sometimes, even chickens that are provided plenty of food and space will still try to jump their fence and seek adventure. Chickens are curious creatures and when they get bored, they'll want to explore new areas. But when we simply clip the feathers on one of our chickens' wings, we can prevent this.

The only equipment that we need for this chore is a pair of sharp scissors and perhaps a helper. The job will be a bit easier with a second set of hands to hold the chicken while you work, or to help to catch the chicken if it tries to escape!

You'll be trimming the larger, primary feathers on one of their wings. This causes the chicken's flight to be off balance, making it far more difficult for them to fly over fences and other barriers.

It's easier to clip chickens' wings at dusk, after the birds have roosted for the night. You can just pick them up, trim the feathers and set them right back onto their roost.

Simply fan the wing out to expose the feathers. Then cut along the primary feathers in a straight line, following the natural angle of the wing. Watch the video for a demonstration of the technique.

Chickens' feathers are made of keratin, the same material as human hair and fingernails. Trimming their feather doesn't hurt the chickens at all, so don't worry!

A quick trim of their primary wing feathers and the chicken is ready to head back into the run with the rest of the birds. To watch the video of this procedure, visit www.hobbyfarms.com/video-how-to-clip-your-chickens-wings.



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IN THE KITCHEN

recipe & photo by Lori Rice

BREAKFAST *Fried Rice*

This recipe turns a classic take-out dinner into a filling, healthy breakfast. Leftover brown rice is cooked with vegetables and pork sausage, then a generous amount of gently cooked eggs is stirred in. This recipe can easily be modified for new versions. Swap cauliflower for the broccoli, add shredded carrot or use chopped bacon or ham instead of sausage.

SERVINGS: 4 to 6

INGREDIENTS

- 4 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 1 small shallot, finely chopped
- 1½ cups chopped broccoli florets
- 1 cup sliced red or yellow bell pepper
- 1 cup thinly sliced cabbage
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- 2 cups cooked brown rice
- ¼ pound pork sausage, cooked and crumbled
- 4 large eggs
- 1 to 2 tablespoons soy sauce
- 1 scallion, sliced
- chopped cilantro for garnish, optional

PREPARATION

Heat 2 tablespoons of the oil in a large deep skillet or wok over medium-high. Add the shallot, and cook until translucent, about 2 minutes.



Stir in the broccoli, cook until bright green, about 3 minutes. Add the bell peppers and cook just until tender, about 1 minute. Add the cabbage. Sprinkle in the salt, and cook one more minute until the vegetables are tender.

Reduce the heat slightly to medium and push the vegetables to one side of the skillet. Pour another tablespoon of oil into the skillet and add the rice. Add the cooked sausage, and stir well. Spread the contents of the skillet to cover the bottom of the pan and press gently. Let cook, undisturbed for 2 to 3 minutes, until the rice is lightly browned on the bottom.

Stir the fried rice. Reduce the heat to low. Push the contents of the skillet to one side again. Pour the remaining oil into the skillet and add the eggs. Let the eggs cook for 1 to 2 minutes, until the whites are firm. Break the yolks with a spatula, and gently stir the eggs to cook completely, another minute or two.

Stir all the contents of the skillet together. Add 1 tablespoon of soy sauce, taste. Add more if desired. How much you add will depend on the flavor of your sausage and if your leftover rice was seasoned. Sprinkle with the scallion and garnish with cilantro, if using, then serve. 🍴

Lori Rice is a writer, photographer and nutritional scientist. Her current passion is small-scale food production. Find her portfolio at www.loririce.com.



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Shutterclucks



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Email an image of your chicken(s) to chickens@chickensmagazine.com with the subject line **Shutterclucks**, and include your name, mailing address and Instagram username. Or enter online at www.hobbyfarms.com/shutterclucks. Follow us on **Instagram** [@chickensmagazine](https://www.instagram.com/chickensmagazine) to vote for the Reader Favorite and maybe win a prize for voting!

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General Store

Bring the chickens inside with rooster, hen and chic(k) décor.

compiled by Sarah E. Coleman



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A Road Less Traveled

My story is quite a story but not in the predictable way. Having a farm to call my own was never something I thought would happen. I was from a suburb just outside Detroit, Michigan, and lived there my whole life. I got married in 2016, and we had two beautiful children. We planned on living a quiet, suburban life — pretty typical.

In August of 2023, my husband tragically and unexpectedly passed away, and I was left shattered and facing a new chapter in my life as a young widow. I was 33 when he passed. Faced with a decision to raise my children, 5 and 3 years old, in the same area my husband and I were familiar with or do something completely unexpected and new, I knew the decision was only mine and mine alone.

I chose unexpected and new, shocking many with my decision. I moved out of the suburbs,

Clare's
Golden Laced
Wyandottes are
gorgeous.

Chickens are
therapy animals.





It isn't a full farm until you have two miniature donkeys!

approximately 55 miles from Detroit to a township within Dexter, Michigan, with strong farming and agricultural roots. Surrounded by farms and egg stands, I wanted my children to grow up learning responsibility for caring for animals, as well as learn to heal and grow from the loss of their father. I, too, was looking to heal in a way that was completely foreign to me.



Clare Waterstradt got into chickens after a major life tragedy.

I picked up my first five chicks, Golden Laced Wyandottes, and then a few weeks later, I couldn't resist the cute ducklings I came across. Then five more chicks, after five more chicks and before you know it, I had two miniature donkeys in my "flock!" My farm consists of 20 chickens, four ducks and two miniature donkeys ... for now.

I've relied on many farming experts through social media and farming magazines as a means of growing my knowledge and skills for this incredibly rewarding venture, and new chapter in my life. As I continue to heal, I'm finding I always had a little knack for farming. Now that I created this farm from scratch, I can't imagine being without it. 🐾

Clare Waterstradt owns Our Time Farm in Dexter, Michigan. She's active on Instagram (@ourtimefarm) and Facebook (ourtimefarmdexter).

Chickens are gateway animals; they lead to ducks, goats and in some cases, donkeys.



Clare's chickens are helping her and her children heal.

Tell Us Your Story!

Email the story of your flock in ~500 words to chickens@chickensmagazine.com (subject line: Chicken Chat). Be sure to include high-resolution images of yourself, your chickens and/or your coop.

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THE *truth* ABOUT...

What's it really like keeping Ameraucanas, Old English Game Bantams, Orpingtons, Silkies and Wyandottes?

BY ANA HOTALING

If you're looking to start or expand your backyard flock but not sure which chicken breeds to are the best, I can help! While I can't tell you which ones would be the perfect match for your particular situation — more than a dozen factors affecting your decision come to mind off the top of my head — I can share which chicken breeds worked for my family and which ones crashed and burned.

The following six comprise part four of my 2025 series honestly recounting my experience rearing these breeds of chicken.

AMERAUCANA

We added White, Blue and Black Ameraucanas to our farm because of their beautiful baby-blue eggs, the same kind laid by their rarer Araucana cousins. We had read that, like Araucanas, Ameraucanas had reproductive issues due to genetics. To our delight and relief, this was never evidenced in our flock.

The Ameraucana girls laid an average of three to four eggs each per week, and every Ameraucana egg we incubated hatched. And we didn't have to incubate many. The Ameraucana girls surprised us again by being almost as broody as our Orpingtons — not necessarily a good thing when we had customers waiting for blue-egg dozens.

Our Ameraucana hens were fabulous mothers, guiding their chicks well into adulthood. Pullets stayed with their mothers as adults, creating little multigenerational girl groups in our flock. We made another unexpected discovery about Ameraucanas, too. They turned out to be our longest-producing layers, with our girls regularly laying at least one egg per week well into their sixth year — and some beyond.

These Ameraucanas also turned out to be our longest-lived chickens. Our black Ameraucana, Dolly, is more than a decade old.



The Ameraucana is an American breed developed in the 1970s from Araucana chickens brought from Chile.

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Our Ameraucana boys were also nothing to sneeze at. After our Orpingtons, our Ameraucana roosters were our best guardians, always watching for predators or anything unusual in their runs or in our yard. Our Blue Ameraucana rooster, Jefferson, was one of my all-time favorite roosters. He wasn't as cuddly as my Orpington boys — our Ameraucanas basically tolerate our presence — but he protected his flock, fathered many chicks and never failed to make his hens his priority.

OLD ENGLISH GAME BANTAM

We never intended to raise Old English Game Bantams, or any kind of bantam for that matter. Bantams would not produce eggs of a marketable size, and integrating them with a large-fowl flock would be almost impossible. We had already made accommodations — figuratively and literally — for our Silkies. We were set until I made a run to our farm-supply store and heard the cheeping from the Chick Days stock tanks.

I instantly fell in love with the teeny baby chicks with the chipmunk stripe down their backs. I could fit three of them on the palm of my hand! They were so dainty. I couldn't resist.

I had absolutely no idea what breed these babies were. They were listed as "Assorted Bantams." Dedicated research determined that these chicks were Old English Game Bantams. I was horrified to read that this bird was originally bred to game fight; was aggressive and highly active; and wouldn't interact well with other chicken breeds.

I soon discovered that these write-ups were completely wrong. Not only were our Old English Game Bantams friendly with us, they endeared themselves to the other chicks in our brooder. Everybody wanted to be their friends, and the nightly chick-carpet snoozefest had the Old English Game Bantams smack in the center. When it was time to move our juveniles to their coops, the Old English Game Bantams went along, happily settling in with our Easter Eggers.

The star of the trio was Belle, named so because she was a pretty little princess. While all three of our Old English Game Bantams eagerly rushed over to greet us, Belle would wait for me to put out my palm. She'd then hop onto my hand and, from there, to my shoulder.

Belle was my pseudo parrot. She adored perching up there while I completed my outdoor chores. She was the epitome of affectionate. In fact, Belle was the little chicken that attended all the organizational meetings

that led to the city of Chelsea approving backyard-flock ownership. The council members were enchanted by the charming little Belle, who happily let anyone who so desired hold her. Never did we witness any aggression towards us or any humans or any combative tendencies towards the other birds.

The Old English Game Bantams were indeed highly active. They behaved like kids in a candy shop, running all over the yard, investigating everything. We chose to discontinue breeding the Old English Game Bantams to focus on the standard breeds, but I would recommend this chicken to anyone seeking a cute poultry pet.

Old English Game bantams have single combs and wattles; are very easy to handle and care for; and make for impressive show birds.



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ORPINGTON

One of my top three chicken breeds, my husband, Jae, and I started raising Orpingtons because they were on The Livestock Conservancy's Priority List of endangered poultry species. In addition, Orpingtons were supposed to be docile and affectionate.

Over the years, we have raised Buff, White, Black, Blue, Lavender and Jubilee Orpingtons. With only one exception — Angel, the first Buff Orpington cockerel we hatched — every single one of our Orpingtons has been gentle, friendly and sweet in disposition. All our roosters (except Angel) have been carefully attentive of their hens, calling them for treats, alerting them to possible predators and firmly shepherding them as they roam our acreage.

They were also excellent fathers. In fact, two of our boys — Arnold and Claude — set eggs briefly so the broody of the moment could stretch her legs. Our Orpington hens were excellent layers, producing an average of four to five large brown eggs weekly.

I estimate about half of the girls would go broody at the drop of a hat. One of our Black Orpington hens, Fitz, was so enamored with motherhood that she hid 18 of her eggs under a shrub, then led us on a frantic search one night when she wasn't present for lock-up.

The Orpington is considered a dual-purpose breed, suitable for eggs and table meat.

We transferred Madame Broody and her enormous clutch to a brooder, and of course all 18 successfully hatched.

Orpingtons are excellent foragers; swift demolishers of stray toads, mice and snakes; and incredibly intelligent. Observation taught them where their humans emerged with those tasty kitchen scraps, and for years we'd find a mob of Orps waiting for us outside our kitchen sliding-glass door. The bolder ones would rap on the door with their beaks to call us.

Orpingtons were one of the chicken breeds that launched our poultry farm and, years later, they are still our main breed.

SILKIE

It's difficult not to love a Silkie. This living fluffball is so gentle and endearing that you'll want to own them all.

That's pretty much what happened to us. We started with a quartet of Buff Silkies. The next thing we knew, we had Blue Silkies, Black Silkies, White Silkies and Splash Silkies. We kept bearded and beardless, and all of them were adorable, though we soon phased out our beardless bunc. (They just weren't "poofy" enough for us.)

Everything I'd read about this lovable breed's disposition was true. Silkies are



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amazingly tolerant. My sons carried them in fair parades, tucked them under an arm to search for Easter eggs with them, sat on the couch — inside! — and read with them on their laps. Silkies are the perfect pet chicken.

They're also amazing setters and mothers. If Orpingtons go broody at the drop of a hat, Silkies go broody at the blink of an eye, even on golf balls and rocks. Our Silkie hens weren't great layers — each averaged about two to three eggs per week — but they happily hatched and raised other poultry's young and continued to mother them even when the chicks were fully adult.

There are some drawbacks to these beautiful bantams, however. They're terrible foragers, even in an enclosed run, possibly because their vision can be obscured by head fluff. Silkies are also short on brains. I've lost count how many times we've had to show our Silkies the entrance to their coop, the location of their nest boxes, how to perch, how to drink from their waterer, etc. The term "birdbrain" was probably coined after an encounter with a Silkie.

They also do poorly in cold weather due to their feather structure. Still, Silkies are ideal for exhibition, their striking looks winning them

many prizes. They're also perfect microflock poultry, especially for small urban and suburban yards. Of all the chicken breeds we've raised over the years, Silkies — chicks and hatching eggs — have always been our best sellers. Silkies join Orpingtons as one of our original breeds and one of our top three favorites.

WYANDOTTE

Like the Orpington, the Wyandotte was one of the first breeds we raised, and for the same reasons: It was on The Livestock Conservancy's Priority List and was described as friendly, docile and great for families with children.

We began with six Silver-Laced chicks, which we raised the same way as our Orpington babies. The birds received lots of cuddles, TLC and hand-fed mealworm treats to train them to recognize and trust us. While this method — which we still use — worked wonderfully with the Orpingtons, the Wyandottes grew less and less affectionate as they grew up.

Stunning chickens, the Wyandottes were a very cohesive flock. The laying hens always stayed within a few feet of their rooster.

This profile is continued on page 79.

The Silkie is named for its atypically fluffy plumage, which is said to feel like silk and satin.

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This profile is continued from page 77.

The hens produced an average of four large brown eggs per week but showed absolutely no tendency towards broodiness. In all honesty, they were an excellent backyard breed: reliable layers, excellent foragers and beautiful to behold. But I just couldn't get past their aloof attitude, especially when they were described as friendly.

I bought four baby pullets — also Silver Laced — from a different breeder just in case our Wyandottes' disposition stemmed from inbreeding. Unfortunately, these new girls showed the exact same attitude towards us ... and towards our older Wyandottes. Our existing flock completely ignored the younger quartet, even though the pullets joined the original flock outdoors once they were old enough to leave the brooder. There were no pecking-order squabbles or hen fights between the two groups. They simply acted as if the other birds were invisible.

I was mystified and perturbed and, ultimately, decided that Wyandottes weren't for us. Despite their beauty, their excellent laying and foraging, and their tight-knit devotion to their group, that detached, cold composure simply didn't click with me. Wyandottes were the first breed we discontinued. 🐔

Ana Hotaling and her husband, Jae, own FMA Farms, a heritage-poultry farm in southeast Michigan.

American Poultry Association- approved varieties are White, Black, Blue, Buff, Columbian, Golden Laced, Silver Laced (pictured), Silver Penciled and Partridge.



“It is important that [poultry] drinking water be clear, tasteless, odorless and colorless. Water that is contaminated exhibits different characteristics depending on the contaminants.

- The presence of particles such as clay, silt or organic material can make the water cloudy. Such water can interfere with the proper operation of watering equipment and can indirectly lead to adverse effects on flock performance.
- Water that is reddish-brown might contain excess iron.
- A blue hue to water can be an indication of excess copper.
- A rotten egg smell is an indication of hydrogen sulfide in water. Hydrogen sulfide may also combine with iron to form black water (iron sulfide), which can also indicate the presence of sulfate-reducing bacteria.
- The taste of water can be affected by the presence of different salts. A bitter taste, for example, is associated with the presence of ferrous and manganese sulfates.”

— **“WATER REQUIREMENTS OF POULTRY,” BY DR. JACQUIE JACOB,
UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE**





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